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"*SHODHANA* (PURIFICATION) OF TOXIC HERBS AND PHARMACOLOGICAL SAFETY VALIDATION: AN INTEGRATIVE REVIEW"

Ms. Shital Gaikwad[1]

AFFLIATIONS:
1. Research Assistant, Ira Consultancy & Research Organisation, Bhosari, Pune, Maharashtra 411026

CORRESPONDENCE:
Ms. Shital Gaiwad
EMAILID:
shitalbgaikwad1999@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Many Ayurvedic herbs of high therapeutic value, such as *Vatsanabha* (Aconitum ferox), *Kupilu* (Strychnos nux-vomica), and *Bhanga* (Cannabis sativa), are inherently toxic in crude form. Ayurveda prescribes specialized purification procedures (*Shodhana*) to detoxify and render these herbs safe for therapeutic use. In modern pharmacology, safety validation involves rigorous toxicological assays. This review aims to critically analyze Ayurvedic *Shodhana* practices and correlate them with modern safety evaluations. **Methods:** A systematic review of classical Ayurvedic texts (Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, Rasatarangini, Rasamrita, and Bhavaprakasha), pharmacognosy monographs, and modern scientific databases (PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, AYUSH Research Portal) was conducted. Inclusion criteria comprised experimental, pharmacological, and toxicological studies on *Shodhana* of toxic herbs. Clinical reports and safety evaluations were also included. **Results:** Evidence indicates that *Shodhana* procedures—using media such as cow's urine, cow's milk, herbal decoctions, and lime water—chemically transform toxic alkaloids, reducing their toxicity while retaining therapeutic efficacy. For instance, aconitine content in *Vatsanabha* decreases significantly after purification with cow's urine and cow's milk. Similarly, strychnine and brucine levels in *Kupilu* reduce after *Shodhana* with cow's milk or ginger juice. Modern studies confirm reduced LD_{50} values and improved safety margins post-purification. However, controlled clinical trials and molecular mechanism studies remain limited. **Discussion:** Ayurvedic *Shodhana* aligns conceptually with detoxification and biotransformation principles in pharmacology. Modern validation supports the safety-enhancing effect but requires standardized protocols, chemical profiling, and rigorous toxicological assessments. **Conclusion:** *Shodhana* bridges traditional detoxification practices with modern toxicological safety validation. Integrating Ayurveda and pharmacology offers a promising model for safe utilization of toxic herbs, warranting further interdisciplinary research.

KEYWORDS: Ayurveda, detoxification, pharmacological safety, *Shodhana*, toxic herbs

INTRODUCTION

The use of medicinal plants with inherent toxicity is a unique feature of Ayurveda.[1] Classical texts mention several potent but poisonous herbs—*Vatsanabha* (Aconitum ferox), *Kupilu* (Strychnos nux-vomica), *Datura* (Datura metel), *Bhanga* (Cannabis sativa), among others—that exhibit high therapeutic potential when processed appropriately.[2-3] However, in their raw form, these herbs can cause severe adverse effects due to toxic alkaloids, glycosides, or resins.[4]

To mitigate these risks, Ayurveda prescribes *Shodhana* (purification/detoxification), a specialized pharmaceutico-therapeutic procedure. *Shodhana* is not mere physical cleansing; it involves sophisticated processes such as boiling, trituration, soaking, and treatment with herbal juices, animal products, or mineral agents.[5-6] These methods are believed to eliminate or neutralize toxic principles while potentiating therapeutic efficacy.[7-8]

The aim of this review is to comprehensively examine *Shodhana* procedures for toxic herbs from Ayurvedic and modern perspectives. The objectives are: (1) to document *Shodhana* techniques as described in Ayurvedic classics; (2) to evaluate pharmacological and toxicological studies validating these procedures; and (3) to analyze the potential of integrating traditional and modern safety approaches for future drug development.[9-10]

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A structured literature review was performed between April and August 2025. Primary Ayurvedic sources included *Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, Ashtanga Hridaya, Rasaratna Samuccaya, Rasatarangini, Rasamrita,* and *Bhavaprakasha*. Commentaries and *Nighantus* were also consulted.[11]

For modern research, electronic databases (PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, AYUSH Research Portal, and Google Scholar) were searched using keywords: *"Shodhana,"* "detoxification," "Ayurveda poisonous herbs," "Aconitum purification," "Strychnos nux-vomica detoxification," and "toxicological validation."[12]

Inclusion criteria:[13]

- Experimental studies on Ayurvedic *Shodhana* of toxic herbs.
- Pharmacological safety and toxicological assessments (*in vitro, in vivo,* clinical).
- Review articles and monographs published in peer-reviewed journals.

Exclusion criteria: [14]

- Non-Ayurvedic detoxification methods.
- Non-peer-reviewed reports and anecdotal claims.
- Studies without details of purification methods.

Type of studies reviewed: Pharmacognostic analyses, chemical profiling studies, experimental toxicology, pharmacological activity reports, and clinical safety trials were included. The evidence was synthesized thematically into (i) Classical references, (ii) *Shodhana* methods, (iii) Chemical and pharmacological changes, and (iv) Modern safety validation.[15]

OBSERVATION AND RESULTS

1. Classical References to Toxic Herbs and *Shodhana*

Ayurvedic classics extensively document the use of poisonous herbs under the category *Visha dravya*. *Charaka Samhita* (Chikitsa Sthana 23) highlights the therapeutic potential of *Vatsanabha* when processed, while *Sushruta Samhita* provides antidotal strategies. *Rasatarangini* and *Rasamrita* elaborate detailed *Shodhana* techniques for mineral and plant toxins, emphasizing the use of media such as cow's urine (*gomutra*), cow's milk (*godugdha*), ghee (*ghrita*), and herbal decoctions (*kashayas*).

Bhavaprakasha Nighantu outlines multiple processing steps for *Kupilu* (nux-vomica seeds), including removal of the outer coat, soaking in cow's urine, and boiling in milk, which not only reduces toxicity but also enhances digestibility. These textual references consistently stress that unprocessed toxic herbs should never be administered, underscoring the safety-first principle in Ayurveda.

2. *Shodhana* Procedures of Major Toxic Herbs

a. *Vatsanabha* (Aconitum ferox):

Raw tubers contain aconitine, mesaconitine, and hypaconitine—potent cardiotoxins and neurotoxins. *Shodhana* involves boiling tubers in cow's urine followed by processing in cow's milk. This dual medium reduces toxic alkaloids while retaining analgesic and antipyretic properties.

b. *Kupilu* (Strychnos nux-vomica):

Seeds contain strychnine and brucine, highly toxic alkaloids. Ayurvedic purification involves soaking in cow's urine for seven days, removing the seed coat,

followed by boiling in cow's milk or ginger juice. Modern studies confirm a significant reduction in strychnine concentration and improved tolerability.

c. *Datura* (Datura metel):

Seeds and leaves contain tropane alkaloids (hyoscyamine, scopolamine). *Shodhana* with cow's milk, sour gruel (*kanji*), or decoction of licorice reduces hallucinogenic effects while retaining bronchodilator activity.

d. *Bhanga* (Cannabis sativa):

Leaves and flowering tops are purified by washing, frying in ghee, or boiling in milk. These methods reduce excessive psychoactivity while retaining analgesic and anti-spasmodic activity.

e. Other Herbs:

- *Jayapala* (Croton tiglium) seeds are detoxified by soaking in cow's urine and removing the kernel.
- *Karaveera* (Nerium indicum) is purified by boiling in cow's milk to reduce cardiac glycoside toxicity.

3. Chemical and Pharmacological Changes Post-*Shodhana*

Modern analytical studies provide evidence for biochemical transformations:

- HPLC and LC-MS analyses show decreased aconitine content in purified *Vatsanabha*.
- Strychnine levels in *Kupilu* seeds reduce by 40–70% after *Shodhana*.
- GC-MS studies confirm reduction in tropane alkaloids in *Datura* after processing.
- Detoxification media often introduce new phytoconstituents; for instance, ginger juice imparts antioxidant compounds to *Kupilu*.

Pharmacologically, these changes manifest as reduced toxicity and improved therapeutic index. Animal studies consistently show higher LD_{50} values (reduced toxicity) after *Shodhana*. Processed herbs demonstrate preserved or enhanced efficacy, such as improved analgesic action in *Vatsanabha* and better muscle relaxant activity in *Kupilu*.

4. Modern Toxicological Validation

a. Acute and Subacute Toxicity Studies:

Experimental studies confirm that purified herbs exhibit reduced signs of toxicity. For example, purified *Kupilu* showed no convulsions at therapeutic doses in rats, while crude seeds caused mortality.

b. Chronic Toxicity Studies:

Long-term administration of purified *Vatsanabha* and *Datura* revealed no organ damage, supporting classical claims of safe use.

c. Pharmacological Safety Assessments:

Modern validation highlights both safety and efficacy. Purified *Vatsanabha* retained significant analgesic effects, while *Kupilu* demonstrated improved muscle relaxant activity without neurotoxicity.

d. Clinical Safety Reports:

Clinical studies on Ayurvedic formulations containing detoxified *Vatsanabha* (e.g., *Tribhuvan Kirti Rasa*) show excellent tolerability in fever management. *Kupilu*-based formulations (e.g., *Kuchila vati*) are widely used in arthritis without toxic manifestations.

5. Thematic Synthesis

- **Ayurvedic Perspective:** *Shodhana* is essential for rendering toxic herbs safe and efficacious.
- **Modern Perspective:** Biochemical changes validate detoxification, but lack of standardized methods hampers reproducibility.
- **Integrative Insight:** Evidence supports that *Shodhana* is not just detoxification but also potentiation, aligning with modern concepts of biotransformation and pharmaceutico-therapeutic modification.

DISCUSSION

The concept of *Shodhana* in Ayurveda exemplifies an advanced pharmaceutico-toxicological strategy developed thousands of years ago. Unlike mere physical cleansing, *Shodhana* induces chemical transformations that attenuate toxicity while enhancing therapeutic potential. From a pharmacological standpoint, this can be equated with processes such as detoxification, hydrolysis, neutralization, and biotransformation.[16]

Modern evidence substantiates many classical claims. Chemical profiling confirms reduction of aconitine, strychnine, brucine, and tropane alkaloids after *Shodhana*. Toxicological studies demonstrate improved LD_{50} values and reduced adverse effects. Clinically, formulations containing processed toxic herbs are widely used with excellent safety records. This concordance highlights Ayurveda's empirical sophistication in drug safety.[17]

However, challenges persist. *Shodhana* procedures

vary across classical texts, with differences in media, duration, and repetitions. Standardization is urgently needed to ensure reproducibility. Moreover, many modern studies are limited to animal models or preliminary chemical analyses. Comprehensive multi-centric clinical trials are scarce, restricting evidence-based validation.[18]

Another gap lies in mechanistic understanding. While chemical reductions are documented, the exact pathways of detoxification—whether alkaloid hydrolysis, complex formation, or metabolite conjugation—are poorly understood. Advanced techniques such as metabolomics, proteomics, and molecular docking could provide deeper insights.[19]

Future research must focus on:[20]

1. Standardizing *Shodhana* protocols with validated pharmacopoeial methods.
2. Developing analytical markers to assess detoxification efficacy.
3. Integrating Ayurveda and toxicology frameworks by mapping *Shodhana* outcomes onto pharmacokinetics and pharmacodynamics.
4. Conducting rigorous clinical trials to establish therapeutic safety and efficacy.
5. Exploring pharmaceutical innovation, where *Shodhana*-like detoxification could inspire novel drug processing technologies.

In essence, *Shodhana* represents a convergence of tradition and science. It demonstrates that drug safety was not an afterthought in Ayurveda but an integral prerequisite. By integrating classical wisdom with modern toxicology, a robust framework for safe and innovative drug development can be established.

CONCLUSION

The present review highlights that *Shodhana*—the Ayurvedic process of detoxifying toxic herbs—serves as a bridge between ancient pharmaceutics and modern toxicological validation. Classical texts clearly emphasize that potentially poisonous herbs must undergo *Shodhana* prior to therapeutic use. Methods such as boiling in cow's milk, soaking in cow's urine, or treating with herbal juices have been described for herbs like *Vatsanabha*, *Kupilu*, *Datura*, and *Bhanga*.

Modern pharmacological and toxicological studies corroborate these claims by demonstrating reduced concentrations of toxic alkaloids, improved LD_{50} values, and enhanced therapeutic margins post-purification. Clinical evidence from Ayurvedic formulations further confirms safety and efficacy.

Despite encouraging evidence, limitations remain. Standardization of *Shodhana* techniques, elucidation of underlying molecular mechanisms, and large-scale clinical validation are urgently needed. Interdisciplinary collaboration between Ayurvedic scholars, pharmacologists, chemists, and clinicians will be critical to advance this field.

In conclusion, *Shodhana* embodies a unique integrative approach to drug safety, reflecting Ayurveda's foresight in addressing toxicity. Its modern validation offers a model for global pharmacology to explore traditional detoxification techniques as innovative strategies for safer therapeutics.

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